

The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM

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APRIL 17th, 1940

DEAR MEMBER,

The congregation of the youth of the country in the armed forces offers a unique opportunity of learning how the nation stands in relation to the ultimate issues of life. At the end of the last war a report was issued on "The Army and Religion," prepared by a representative Commission and based on a very wide body of evidence. An account of it was given in the Supplement of C.N.-L. No. 4. No evidence on a corresponding scale is available in the present war, but a good deal of information comes to us in letters from our members and others and in talks. It all tends to confirm the picture given in the earlier report.

There is the same witness to the superb qualities revealed under the stress of war—the astonishing courage and cheerfulness, the absence of self-concern, and the willingness to help others. "For generosity, loyalty, comradeship—they're grand," writes one of our correspondents.

These virtues draw their nourishment, no doubt, in no small part from the Christian tradition. But equally striking is the absence in the overwhelming majority of any conscious connection between these qualities and the Christian faith. No correspondent puts the number of practising Christians at more than 10 per cent. of the whole; many would consider the proportion to be smaller. The immense majority of the nation as mirrored in the Services—at a guess perhaps 90 per cent.—have no vital link with the Churches. They have an abysmal ignorance of what Christianity is. Those who do not regard the teaching of the Churches as effete, feel it to be irrelevant—having no recognisable connection with their actual lives. There is a general belief in God, and a religious note sometimes appears when men are writing to those at home. But the vague and undefined belief in God has no conscious relation to Christ, and, as one correspondent writes, does not seem to necessitate any form of co-operation with God.

A consequence of this general lack of conscious Christian faith and prevailing ignorance of what Christianity is is the absence of any belief in Christianity as a force that might bring about a new order of society. In fact, there appears to be relatively little thought or concern about the future of society at all. The majority look forward to returning, when the war is over, to the old familiar conditions of life. This apathy is doubtless due partly to the fact that the conditions of service are inimical to serious thought. It is one of the gravest evils of war that it tends to kill thought. It produces an unthinking fatalism, and tends to bring about a deadly black-out of mind.

Beneath this seeming indifference there is also a questioning and seeking. Attempts are made to thrash out the deeper problems of life. If there is a God, why does He allow all this evil? How can a Christian fight? These and similar questions are not infrequently the subject of discussion. They are problems to which they feel there

should be satisfactory answers if Christianity is true ; and as they fail to find them, they conclude that Christianity is "bunk." It is suggested that the sermons to which men listen are too often not directed to the issues which exercise their minds ; what is said is not so much above their heads as on the wrong wave-length.

The impression left on one's mind is inescapable. There is among the youth of the nation at present no force of belief or passionate conviction capable of bringing a new society to birth. Least of all do the great majority put their trust in Christianity as a power able to transform life. I know of one or two small cells of Christians both among officers and in the ranks ; and there are doubtless more—perhaps a not inconsiderable number in the aggregate. But, take it all in all, the signs of creative life are few and far.

Unpalatable as the conclusion is, there is no way out except to face it frankly. It may be that a revival of religion will come only when we have realised that our need is desperate. And the situation undoubtedly abounds in opportunities. Many hundreds of clergy and ministers are brought by the war into direct human touch with men of all sorts and conditions, sharing with them both the lesser discomforts and anxieties of day-to-day life and the facing of the major issues of existence. Out of these experiences may be born a faith that has been tested and proved real, and that has power to win men and inspire them to heroic tasks.

RELIGIOUS CONDITIONS IN THE FRENCH ARMY

These same issues have been the subject of recent discussion in the French Press. The Paris journal *Études* (15, Rue Monsieur, Paris. 5 frs.) for March 20, contains an article, based on reports from French priests serving in the Forces, on "What is the Religion of the French People Worth?" The similarity of the attitudes to those prevailing among the youth of our own country is striking.

The sense of a new religious opportunity finds expression in the following passage from a letter from a French priest to his brother :

"I understand what you must be feeling as you parade in uniform. For myself I am entirely happy to be a priest without wearing the *soutane*. I find it a marvellous experience, since there is no longer any barrier between me and the people. One is a man among men, as Christ was. The only thing that distinguishes us is that we are people in whom others ought to be able to detect the presence of God by the true love which we manifest, by our courtesy, our loyalty, our purity. Our whole being ought so to radiate our faith that others can pierce through our outward garb and perceive a man wholly given up to God."

Priests and seminarists are unanimous in declaring that the experience of mingling with the mass whom it is their mission to save is unique and irreplaceable. They speak at the same time of the barrier of ignorance, indifference or prejudice which separates them from the majority. It is hard, one writes, to have so much to give and to be so far away. These two experiences are inseparably linked—the joy of being in close and brotherly relations with their fellows, and the feeling of insuperable distance and the anguish of not being able to help them as one would wish.

If Christianity is to have any bite for men in their present state of mind, the author of the article suggests, it will not be so much by the attraction of its rites or its emotions, but chiefly because it alone can satisfy the need for a faith which can guide the world. The almost universal mood is one of scepticism.

"Unhappily," writes one French priest, "the impression which they make on

me may be summed up in one word, they all appear to me to be sceptics—sceptics in regard to human matters, in regard to the war in particular, and in regard to politics in general. Many of them have been militant members of the extreme Left, and many more of the extreme Right—still attached in some cases to the party; but this seems to be more by custom than by conviction. The politics of recent years have literally worn them out, even spiritually; they no longer believe in anything. Men who would be ready to have their faces bashed on February 6 regard articles and lectures in which the Allies are represented as the defenders of Christian civilisation and of the rights of the human person as mere clap-trap.”

I had just translated this passage when a letter reached me from a friend serving with the British forces, which contains a remarkable parallel: “Daily men are losing faith in themselves and in democracy,” he writes. “Daily they are losing interest in politics. Their sense of social responsibility is dying, and rapidly they are passing to the fighting line. In the midst of this appalling drift to scepticism the Church has a great opportunity and we must use it while it is ours. Soon it will be too late. Men will remember that in their dire need we have had no word for them which was plainly spoken in terms which they could understand.”

The French article goes on to assert that, in the state of mind which has been described, the encyclicals of the Pope dealing with the problems and events of the hour touch a chord that is readily awakened. In the emotions which these pronouncements arouse one can recognise an authentic religious sentiment. To understand the way in which they have power to touch men to-day one must understand how much of real religion there is in the confused social and political movements which agitate humanity. What men to-day look for and welcome from the Pope—a voice which will point out to them their duty and give them the courage to fulfil it—they expect also from all those who call themselves Christians.

Once again the same note is struck in the letter from my English friend: “What, then, are we to do?” he asks. “My suggestion is that the Church of England should produce and publish a plain and concise statement of the fundamental facts which are directly relevant to the ordering of society, and the postulates which they involve for a Christian reconstruction, in terms which are readily intelligible to the ordinary man. Let us have enunciated authoritatively a statement of Christian principles in such a way as to compel the attention of Christians and summon them to re-examine their present criteria, and at the same time to challenge the unbelievers.”

The author of the article in *Études* asks, in conclusion, whether one may expect that the mass of French people will return to Christianity. To look for this immediately would be an illusion. But one fact gives ground for hope and at the same time is a protection against serious error. The religious question meets the Frenchman to-day in its purity. Christianity in France is no longer political—nor is it any longer national. The French Catholic of to-day, even when he is struggling to save values that are fundamentally Christian, knows that France is not equivalent to Christendom, and still less to Christianity. If he is loyal to his faith, it is not for self-advantage, nor because he feels himself inextricably bound to an accepted culture, nor because he looks upon his country as a prophet chosen to perform a special religious mission.

In the sceptical attitude which he is often inclined to adopt in regard to the cause for which he is prepared to fight and die there is undoubtedly an element of self-deception. His real fear is of becoming the dupe of fine-sounding words or of the big financiers. But is there not also a keen sense of the truth, a determination not to confuse justice with interest? Is it beyond the power of Christians to meet this need for

absolute justice and complete truth? Far more than by pious phrases, the Christian answer will be given by unflinching obedience to conscience, by the serenity which comes from the assurance of fulfilling one's duty even in the midst of human complications, by a complete and unreserved charity which alone reaches the heart. It is by these that the Christians of to-day will unveil the true face of Christianity to eyes blinded by doubt and scepticism. In these respects every French Catholic to-day holds in his hands the religious future of his country.

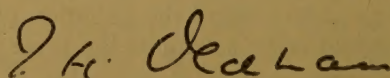
THE ADELPHI CENTRE

In connection with the main subject of last week's letter, some of you may be interested to know of the Adelphi Centre which is becoming an agricultural community of twenty or thirty voluntary workers who are willing to give hard work in return for their maintenance. It has embarked on an intensive market-gardening and general produce scheme. This is only a beginning, and the Centre hopes to make itself responsive to new claims as these arise. Its immediate job, however, is to redeem the waste land as quickly as possible, and an appeal is made for support of all kinds—money, livestock, seedlings, agricultural implements, pigs, chickens, goats and bees.

A conference was held at the Centre at Easter which discussed the kind of activity people of goodwill can best be engaged in when their country is committed to a policy of total war. The conclusion reached was that no programme of purely political change, however revolutionary, will suffice to bring any sort of lasting peace to Europe. The changes of heart, mind and life necessary for peace will only reveal themselves when a minority of persons have created a pattern of peaceful living. They must do this by dedicating themselves to a life in which the continuous practice of equality and fraternity is maintained by a religious imagination sustained and nourished by the recognition of a common Fatherhood.

Fuller information will be found in the April number of the *Adelphi* (Basque House, Langham, near Colchester, Essex. 10d. post free).

Yours sincerely,



Subscriptions. — The rate of subscriptions to the News-Letter is 10s. (\$3 in U.S.A. and Canada) for one year, and 5s. 6d. (\$1.50 in U.S.A. and Canada) for six months, and 3s. for three months.

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APRIL 17th, 1940

THE STORY OF A NEW COMMUNITY

Dear Dr. Oldham,—

You ask about conditions on this New Housing Estate. It is, I suppose, similar to many others, but it differs from them in two rather important ways.

First, it is, I believe, the largest of its kind in a northern industrial city. It is planned to house a population of about 35,000, mostly from slum-clearance property, with five schools. It lies to the north of Sheffield in what was hilly pasture land—a very healthy district.

The second difference relates to the "Church" side of things. The late bishop, faced with this vast new parish, decided to ask the Society of the Sacred Mission (Kelham) to be entirely responsible for it, and even added parts of two older estates, making a future total population of something like 45,000. There have been first two, then three, then four, and now five clergy on the staff here, as the population has increased from about 2,000 three years ago to about 35,000 to-day.

Work was begun in a small mission room which served as a church and week-day hall for social purposes. It cannot hold more than 250 or so for worship, but frequently has to for the Parish Communion at 9.15 on Sundays. Just a year ago the parish church (St. Cecilia's) was consecrated, and work has gone on there in addition to the mission room, which is about a mile away. To-day a start is being made on a third site for a rather larger mission room to serve the east end of the parish.

It is indicative of what there has been to do here that at Easter, 1938, there were thirty-eight communicants at the one little mission room. This year (1940) there were close on 300 both there and at the parish church. Nearly all these have been confirmed here during the past two years—grown-ups as well as children.

I mention the fact for a special reason. A large new estate brings together people who have lived in several different Church of England parishes. In the course of visiting them and living amongst them the clergy obtain a rather interesting bird's-eye view of what has been going on over a period of a good many years in some typically poor industrial parishes. And the view is not altogether pleasing. Here very briefly are some of the salient features:—

(1) Ignorance of fundamental Christian teaching is widespread over at least two generations.

(2) Churchmanship is largely "congregational," with little sense of the larger Christian community.

(3) The understaffing of town parishes, leaving one man alone as vicar of a parish of ten or twelve thousand souls, has clearly meant neglect of necessary teaching and visiting as well as overstrain upon the man himself.

(4) The ever-present consequences of disunity—Church *versus* Chapel.

In other words, one suddenly sees a cross-section of English Church life—and the sight demands answers to two questions: (1) What do we really suppose we are here to do? (2) Are we using the best strategic methods to do it?

In regard to the first of these questions:

(a) It would seem to be true that all too frequently a priest loses his vision of God and his enthusiastic love for souls after he has been in orders for five or ten years. His previous training has probably been inadequate. He may not really have ever had opportunity to grasp and think through the faith he is there to teach. He has probably got married at a time when he ought to be giving *all* his energy to learning his parochial job. He finds his income too small in relation to his needs. He begins

to feel discouraged and overwhelmed by the apparent fruitlessness of his work.

(b) The form of worship in church is somehow often meaningless to many and out of touch with the ordinary needs of parishioners. Further, it often fails to be the living expression of a Christian community offering its praise, adoration, intercession and penitence to God. It often degenerates into a necessary adjunct to a sermon—this latter being the really important thing.

(c) The social life of the people, as organised by the Church, is somehow divorced from the worship of the Church. The vicar “looks in” benignly; men’s institutes run themselves without reference to the Church which founded them; many come to think that it is the main job of the Church to provide whist drives, socials, dances, jumble sales, bazaars, for their entertainment.

(d) The real business of the parish priest is by every possible means to teach those around him of the love of God and how that should find expression both in worship and in everyday life—the old Church Catechism supplies the clue in the two duties, towards God and towards neighbour.

But we are re-learning the truths that the Christian life is not simply something “between me and God” or a matter of mere personal opinion or taste or temperament. It can only be lived in and through a living community. Therefore a great deal of the priest’s responsibility is the building up and development of the particular community over which he is given charge.

In that community there must clearly be scope for much activity and opportunity for individual gifts and abilities to find expression. Although it is true that much “social” work which was once done directly by the Church is now done by the State, there is still an enormous amount for the Church as such to do. Clubs for boys and girls should still be a very vigorous part of Church life, and the parish priest should be very closely in touch with the members. Knowledge of the schools in his parish is essential (and surely he will soon be allowed entry for more than purely unofficial purposes). Men’s clubs, women’s clubs, mixed clubs are all activities which should be part of the Church’s life and,

again, the clergy should know their members intimately and be available to them easily.

There is much that might continue to be part and parcel of a vigorous community life, but every priest must have clearly before his mind what he is out to do and why and, so far as possible, use his time only for those things which fall inside certain well-defined principles. It is largely because we are uncertain of our ultimate aim that we often make a wrong selection of the multitudinous duties which are set before us.

In regard to the second question, whether we are using the best strategic methods,

(a) The parochial system has an enormous amount to commend it, but it is quite useless if those who are responsible think of it as an easy way to “keep things going,” or that a parish of ten or twelve thousand can be adequately looked after by one man.

(b) As things are at present, “livings” vary considerably in financial value. This is a real scandal to the “outsider” who knows nothing of the large establishments to be maintained and other inevitable expenses. If he does know, he probably wonders why in the name of fortune they cannot be cut out as similar white elephants would be in any decent commercial firm.

(c) We have tried to fit what was essentially a “countrified” system on to an entirely new industrialised system of life. The village certainly was a real manageable and self-conscious community. But a little bit of a conventicle down some street in the back end of nowhere is not serving a “community,” but a few souls who happen to pick on that church to come to. And, unless that church can begin to foster and develop the community life of that place, it had far better be pulled down and built again somewhere else.

(d) If we are out to build up a lively Christian community it is clear that the geographical position of church premises (not to say vicarages and clergy houses) should be a vital consideration.

(e) We are still hesitating over the problems of uniting benefices and there is much to be said on both sides. It cannot be wise strategy to stick to a system which

may have worked adequately a hundred years ago, but which now fails to meet the needs of men and women in large cities so different from what then existed.

When people are moved out in vast numbers they take some time to shake down into a new community. If the church is there in good time much may be done in the building up of that new community life upon Christian foundations. There are obvious difficulties of which (here) the absence of local schools at first was one. But the clergy are (or should be) natural leaders, and can begin at once to lead folk together and help them to find and express that spirit of common fellowship which is an essential part of ordinary society life.

The parish magazine can be a factor in all this. Here we departed from the conventional page or two and produced something which strove to show a variety of interests and yet aimed at being a link between new neighbours. After two years of publication it now has a circulation of 1,200 monthly, and thus finds its way into the majority of homes. There is much evidence that it is widely read.

One of the facts which confront a great many people is the apparent lack of discipline among young people. In the post-war years a great deal was talked about letting the young develop naturally, freedom, self-expression, and the like. But, as others have found, a child cannot express himself rightly until he has a self to express. He has no inherent right of criticism until he has some grounds upon which to criticise. So we have gone for disciplined organisations in which rules and regulations play a prominent part—in order to express principles which are important for young people to learn.

For instance, attendance at the Parish Communion at 9.15 is of obligation for all who belong to youth organisations. In experience this has proved extremely valuable, and there has been little evidence of boys and girls hating to come to church. The hour demands for many an unwonted sacrifice of the appalling Sunday morning habit of indulgence in extravagant sleep. Moreover it is proving up to the hilt that youth organisations, if they are to build people solidly into the framework of the

Christian community, must have some really live contact with the *normal* worship of the whole family. There is obviously a place for "young people's services," but the regular and normal Sunday worship should be with adults if the young are to grow up with a knowledge of the ordinary worshipping life of the Church.

We find the young intensely interested and responsive—and adults too. Direct and simple teaching of the faith always seems to bring encouraging response. We clergy are apt to neglect teaching on prayer and the natural use of the Sacraments for a variety of reasons. But our experience here has been (from those who were previously outside) a keen readiness to respond to every demand, and (from those who had had loose contacts with the Church before) an attitude of "Why weren't we told this before?"

Finally, it would seem to be imperative that the clergy should be in and out of the parish day and night. Visiting is still valued, and brings a fair response if only in establishing friendly relations. The sight of four or five clergy (undisguised—in fact in "religious" habit) moving about the parish is a constant source of satisfaction, not to say surprise.

What comes out of all this seems to me to be this:—

(1) The responsibility of the clergy is enormous, and should be shared by a far larger number, even if this should mean that none of them receives more than £300 a year.

(2) With a thoroughly "professional" training in theology and pastoralia and a real desire to serve their communities devotedly, they should be a tremendous power for good, since the vast majority of ordinary people are yearning for Christian teaching and an opportunity for consecrated service.

(3) The Church in any given parish can be and should be a centre of a living community of men and women trying, by the grace of God, to live the Christian life *together*, having regard to their duty to God in worship and sacrament and their duty to neighbour in service and fellowship—in fact (to use your own phrase) a "cell" in which principles are learnt and applied

and from which those same principles are put attractively before others.

(4) The vast new estates now beginning to grow up in this country are the places in which (please God) the Church may once again try to establish itself as a living organism leavening the new lump and determined not to repeat the failures of the nineteenth century industrial cities.

I may add a few facts about general conditions.

The northerner often feels that the southerner does not understand him. This is on the whole true. Several generations of men who have lived on hard wages from mill, warehouse, forge, workshop or mine, and women who have known the pinch of poverty, the insecurity of labour, and the uphill grind of keeping a house clean in a permanently grimy slum—these are factors of which many more favoured southerners are ignorant. It has certainly produced a race inclined to be materialist, sometimes hard, a bit sentimental, and always wonderfully hospitable and kind-hearted.

Hours are long and frequently awkward, where a three-shift system is at work. Women are often compelled to have meals ready at most extraordinary times and frequency. On a new estate all these conditions still obtain. In addition there are extra expenses—slightly higher rents, much higher travelling expenses, bigger appetites in the children and higher prices in most shops. Although on balance advantages far outweigh disadvantages, these greater inroads must not be overlooked, for they inevitably affect the lives of people who have to consider every penny.

The vast majority of young and middle-aged people welcome the change—garden and all. Very few go back into the town

into uncondemned property by exchange. Most people take a good deal of trouble over their gardens, and constantly speak of the move as something which ought to have happened twenty years ago (seventy years would be nearer the truth!).

Furnishing a large house proves difficult for many. They often fall victims to enterprising furnishers and find it hard to keep up their weekly payments. Bedding seems to be a special difficulty. In hundreds of houses the bedding is thoroughly inadequate either for proper warmth, cleanliness or comfort.

Impatience is sometimes shown that houses soon become dirty again. But it is unreasonable to expect that people who have for three generations lived under unspeakable conditions should suddenly learn the art of house, or even personal, cleanliness. There are many exceptions and often houses are a credit to those who live in them.

Food is a great problem, but cooking is a greater. Although most Yorkshire housewives still bake their own bread, there is a remarkable lack of good cooking in other directions. Many mothers are content to feed their children on useless rubbish, (a) because they think they cannot afford better food (which costs much less in fact), (b) because they cannot manage to train their children to eat what they think they don't like, and (c) because it is less trouble. There ought to be some effective national training in simple and economic shopping and cooking.

Children are a thousand times healthier and therefore apt to be more high-spirited and mischievous.—Yours sincerely,

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